

WELCOMING THEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY
IN THE MAINLINE PROTESTANT CHURCH: A CASE STUDY
AT ST. BRENDAN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH, JUNEAU, ALASKA

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Abstract

Welcoming Theological Diversity in the Mainline Protestant Church:

A Case Study at St. Brendan's Episcopal Church, Juneau, Alaska

In this paper, I propose a descriptive and exploratory analysis of the mainline Protestant church that I attend, St. Brendan's Episcopal Church in Juneau, Alaska, to identify characteristics that can inform the development of programs and services in mainline Protestant churches that are specifically Christian but that also welcome and celebrate theological diversity. The research question is: What are the characteristics among members at St. Brendan's that can inform the development of programs and services in mainline Protestant churches that are specifically Christian but that also welcome and celebrate theological diversity?

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Project Overview

In this paper, I provide a descriptive and exploratory analysis of the mainline Protestant church that I attend, St. Brendan's Episcopal Church in Juneau, Alaska, to identify characteristics that can inform the development of programs and services in mainline Protestant churches that are specifically Christian but that also welcome and celebrate theological diversity. That catalog of attributes may become a tool that may be used to inform the development of programs and services to welcome into the church potential members who are seeking a Christian community that is characterized by a high degree of individual as well as communal spirituality, that welcomes interreligious perspective and praxis in a specifically Christian setting, and that affirms multiple understandings of soteriological doctrine. The research question is: What are the characteristics among members at St. Brendan's that can inform the development of programs and services in mainline Protestant churches that are specifically Christian but that also welcome and celebrate theological diversity?

Project Significance and Goals

Church attendance is significantly decreasing at mainline Protestant churches such as the Episcopal Church. Some of the criticisms of these Protestant denominations – criticisms that are often proffered as potential explanations for the decline in attendance, especially among young people and those who identify as “spiritual but not religious” – are that the church has become too bureaucratic and too focused on telling members how they should think and feel. That is, the church and the liturgy are too focused on being prescriptive or telling us what we should believe

about God and how we should think about God, rather than on facilitating and empowering the human experience of God.

Moreover, young people are increasingly searching for personal experience of God outside the traditional church, and often outside of the Christian religious spectrum. These seekers find inspiration and meaning in the practices and teachings of less traditional Christian organizations such as the contemporary mega churches, as well as in the practices and teachings of other faith traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, and in indigenous and earth-based practices such as paganism. In some church communities, the result is expanded ecumenism and interreligious dialog – and associated expanded size of the population that may be served – while in others it is denunciation of “cafeteria Christianity” or even identifying it as the heresy of syncretism, assessments that effectively close doors to seekers.

Both young and older people further decry the current status of mainline Christian churches, including mainline Protestant churches, as a result of growing distrust of church governance, especially in light of recent sexual abuse scandals in the Roman Catholic Church and very public financial scandals in mega churches and tele-evangelist organizations. The recent leadership scandal at Liberty University,¹ for example, has resulted in mistrust of the nation’s more conservative Christian institutions. Further complicating the current situation is the growing conflation of conservative Christianity and “party line” theology with specific political figures and partisan politics in general.²

¹ Sarah McCammon, “Liberty University Doubles Down after Falwell Denies Reports of his Resignation,” *National Public Radio*, August 24, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/08/24/905600300/falwell-resigns-from-liberty-university-following-sex-scandal-allegations>.

² Pew Forum, “White Evangelicals See Trump as Fighting for their Beliefs, Though Many Have Mixed Feelings about his Personal Conduct,” *Pew Research Center Religion and Public Life*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.pewforum.org/2020/03/12/white-evangelicals-see-trump-as-fighting-for-their-beliefs-though-many-have-mixed-feelings-about-his-personal-conduct/>.

The mainline church that insists that its members adhere rigidly to a static orthodoxy and orthopraxis places its members (and potential members) in a very binary situation: they may choose to join or remain with the church despite its faults and despite their perception of an increasing lack of congruence in an evolving world, or they may leave the church. There is not an option to explore and develop a personally and communally meaningful theological understanding of that evolving world from within these churches that present this binary worldview. In fact, this either/or structure seems to indicate that contemporary Western Christians have to choose between the church and the larger globalized world culture – sort of a church/not-church dichotomy. This dichotomy, artificial or not, may well be the foundation of the also very binary spiritual-but-not-religious identity.

In this paper, I describe an exploratory analysis of theologically diverse perspectives among members of the mainline Protestant church that I attend, St. Brendan's Episcopal Church in Juneau, Alaska, to identify the characteristics that make this church welcoming of theological diversity. St. Brendan's is well-known in the Alaska diocese for the theological diversity among its members and for its tolerance of both heterodoxy and heteropraxis, while maintaining the centrality of Christ. The goal of the paper is to identify characteristics that can inform the development of programs and services in mainline Protestant churches that are specifically Christian but that also welcome and celebrate theological diversity and integration of other traditions. There is particular emphasis on potential opportunities to welcome to the church those individuals who identify as spiritual-but-not-religious or who are otherwise suspicious of the mainline church as being somehow anti-spiritual.

Identification of these characteristics of tolerance for and welcoming of theological diversity can lay the foundation for programs and practices that may become potential solutions

to declining memberships in the Protestant church in general and the Episcopal Church in specific. It may also provide opportunity to bring the growing population identifying as spiritual-but-not-religious back to the church. Ultimately, such research in the future may inform a reintegration of the personal and the communal practice of Christian faith, as well as serve to re-energize Protestant congregations by integrating knowledge of God with the personal experience of God.

A number of leading voices in the mainline church are increasingly affirming that it is a disconnect between the former, which they describe as religion, and the latter, which they describe as spirituality, which plays a significant role in the growing exodus from the church. Theologian Diana Butler Bass, for example, points out that a new view of spirituality as a valued form of living the Christian faith can transform the institutional church and increasingly culturally remote liturgies to become more personally meaningful and culturally relevant.³ Theologian Marcus Borg posited that Christian faith, to be vital, must be about relationship with Jesus and lived experience of personal transformation through that relationship, not in place of doctrine but to inform and both personally and communally actualize doctrine.⁴ The audience for this project may thus include both the mainline Protestant church and individuals seeking a church home.

Theological and Theoretical/Conceptual Stance

The theological standpoint from which I am approaching this case study is my own progressive Episcopal perspective, which combines Protestant belief with Catholic practice and emphasis on mysticism, and which affirms any theology that brings people together for the

³ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 91.

⁴ Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: the Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 2-3.

common good of the larger world community and enhances human understanding and experience of the holy and sacramental nature of life. I choose Christianity as the religion that best provides me with a theological structure within which I can approach the mystery of God and celebrate the divine; however, I do not believe Christianity is the sole route to salvation. In fact, I believe the practice of Christianity is enhanced by universalism and by the introduction of concepts and practices from other religions, and that these concepts and practices in no way diminish Christianity's understanding of the centrality of Christ. In other words, the basic premise underlying this paper is the belief that theological diversity is something to be welcomed, and that interreligious practice has a valuable role in informing the practice of Christian faith in ways that expand and deepen the centrality of Christ and the innate holiness of ourselves and others, without exclusivity or syncretism.

It is important to note that I am making several assumptions in this case study. The first is that there is a population of unchurched seekers who desire but do not have a spiritual home, or who eschew the traditional Christian church due to theological questions or barriers. As noted in Chapter 3, this assumption is well-supported by popular culture and by contemporary academic research. Another assumption is that many of these seekers, regardless of whether they currently describe themselves as Christian, are what former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams calls "cultural Christians," raised in a cultural tradition where meaning – religious, spiritual, and otherwise – is derived and promulgated from Christian concepts such as the existence of a supreme authority and the symbolism of the cross and the resurrection.⁵ In this sense, there is great potential for Christianity to provide these seekers with a fundamentally meaningful, culturally relevant spiritual home.

⁵ Theo Hobson, "Rowan Williams Got It Right about Ritual," *The Guardian*, October 31, 2012.

For contemporary spiritual seekers, however, a spiritual home is one that welcomes them as seekers, specifically. Thus, the assumption is also that members of this population are not so much seeking theological certainty as they are seeking acceptance of their questioning theological approach. They don't necessarily want answers; they want a community within which they can safely explore theological questions and which is welcoming of not just questions but very fundamental differences of, for example, Christologies and theological anthropologies (although they may not know the theological terminologies for these differences). Contemporary theologians David Felten and Jeff Procter Murphy discuss the "cost" of certainty in terms of isolating humanity from God "by claiming that what we know is the whole truth and that there's no room for others' experience or input," and they further discuss how failure to be open to ambiguity and differing perspectives causes religious stagnation and exclusion of seekers.⁶

Diana Butler Bass describes the growing contemporary community of theological explorers as a new and transformational "Great Awakening," arising from the work of the Spirit in the world, responding to and comforting God's people during a period of history when religious practice and belief no longer inspires them or even feels meaningful.⁷ Butler Bass further describes such seekers as longing for meaning in a world where Christianity has become conflated with both religious and political fundamentalism,⁸ and where the concept of spirituality has been transformed from a description of religious practice to something separate from such practice and even critical of organized religion.⁹

⁶ David Felten and Jeff Procter Murphy, *Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 7.

⁷ Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 31.

⁸ Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 81.

⁹ Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 68.

Roman Catholic monk W. Paul Jones cogently sums up the contemporary challenge and the needs of the seeker, noting that “What persons seem to be seeking is a viable theological [w]orld experienced as ethos,” which he describes as “the lived ‘feel’ of shared practice, custom, belief, purpose, and procedure, which constitutes a congregation as a corporate personality.”¹⁰ That is, the disconnect between individual seekers and the institution of the mainline church becomes both artificial and unnecessary when the church is the body that facilitates the community of such individuals and celebrates the process of finding God, rather than being the arbiter of how Christians are allowed to interact with God.

The second assumption is that attracting theological diversity is something the contemporary mainline Protestant church values and seeks to achieve. Butler Bass addresses this assumption in her discussion of Western culture in general as viewing religion as what one practices “when one assents to body of organized doctrines.”¹¹ She notes that this view has created the paradigmatic sequence of “believing, behaving, and belonging” as the appropriate response to spiritual seeking. However, this sequence becomes no longer viable in a culture where *prima facie* belief has been supplanted by a more scientific world’s appetite for evidence and experience. In fact, Butler Bass tells us, this sequence is largely responsible for the decline in “belonging” in the mainline church. Rather, she maintains that the order must be reversed to “belonging, behaving, believing,” in order both for seekers to find a spiritual home and for the mainline church to survive.¹² Theologian and Methodist minister Hal Taussig supports the concept that the mainline church benefits from theological diversity, noting that for postmodern generations (defined as those under 40), faith must be based on doctrines that have intellectual

¹⁰ W. Jones, *Worlds within a Congregation: Dealing with Theological Diversity* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 83.

¹¹ Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 202.

¹² Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 204.

integrity and thus stand up to scientific critique.¹³ That is not to say that there is not room for the mystery of the divine or of salvation, but rather that, as Taussig notes, provides space that allows for celebration of Christian experience without having to forgo human authenticity or, worse, having to assert that Christians are “ ‘saved’ by Christ, as if those who are not Christian are ‘lost.’ ”¹⁴ It is when the institutional church recognizes, as Lutheran minister Leah Schade points out, that conflict is not undesirable, ipso facto, but is rather a dialogical invitation,¹⁵ that the institution of the church becomes a place of welcome.

A third assumption undergirding this project is that St. Brendan’s Episcopal Church is a theologically diverse congregation. I make this assumption based on my personal experience as a member of the St. Brendan’s congregation. That experience arises from participation in worship, religious education, ministries, and social activities. It is further supported by conversations about theological diversity with clergy, with church members, and with members of the larger Juneau Episcopalian community. St. Brendan’s is the church home of the retired Archdeacon of Southeast Alaska, who played a key role in welcoming Alaska’s LBGQT population to the church. The Reverend Caroline Malseed, the priest-in-charge, is a community leader in progressive Christian theology, inviting discussion, actively seeking different perspectives, and welcoming all who wish to share in a spiritual community regardless of religious affiliation or lack thereof.

¹³ Hal Taussig, *A New Spiritual Home: Progressive Christianity at the Grass Roots* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2006), 31-32.

¹⁴ Taussig, *A New Spiritual Home*, 44.

¹⁵ Leah Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 80.

Description of St. Brendan's

St. Brendan's Episcopal Church is located in Juneau, Alaska, a community of approximately 30,000 in a geographic area that makes it the third largest municipality in the United States, and larger than some New England states. Due to its exceptionally rugged terrain, Juneau is accessible only by plane or boat. Despite the fact that it is the capital of Alaska, there are no roads in or out of Juneau. It is an ethnically diverse community, with significant Alaska Native and Asian populations, although the majority of Juneau residents are White. Major industries are tourism, government, and resource extraction, and the average age is 38. Juneau is also unique in that the ratio of males to females is 104:100, unlike most of the rest of the United States where women outnumber men. The population is generally well-educated, with over 96% high school graduates, and the median income is well over \$100,000.¹⁶

St. Brendan's is not however, a microcosm of Juneau. Its members tend to be older and female, and generally economically stable. There are slightly more than 50 members in the church directory, roughly half of whom are pledging members.¹⁷ St. Brendan's offers a Rite II service (updated liturgy using contemporary language) each Sunday; monthly Celtic prayer services; an adult education program; Godly Play, attended by 2-6 children each week; and a number of additional services throughout the liturgical year. The congregation hosts a weekly coffee hour, a monthly men's breakfast, a music ministry, and a number of special events. Ministries include a food pantry, a weekly hot meal provided at no cost to the Juneau community (The Galley), outreach and activity sponsorship at Juneau's Pioneer Home and youth services facilities, and support for a variety of local and national charities. There are three members of the

¹⁶ World Population Review, *Juneau, Alaska*, 2020, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/juneau-ak-population>.

¹⁷ St. Brendan's Episcopal Church, *2019 Annual Report*, Juneau, AK, 2019.

clergy in residence, The Reverend Caroline Malseed, Priest-in-Charge, The Venerable Mark Boesser, retired Archdeacon of Southeast Alaska, and The Reverend Michael Grubbs, Deacon.

St. Brendan's is one of two Episcopal churches in Juneau, with a mission “to provide a place to worship for Episcopalians residing in the general populated suburban areas north of Juneau, and to reach the unchurched. We seek also to reach those who have no church affiliation and, in general, to provide for a wide range of community, spiritual, and social needs.”¹⁸ The church motto is “A Harbor for God’s Love.” St. Brendan’s began as St. Andrew’s by-the-Glacier in 1971, with services held in schools and other churches. It was officially a parochial mission of Juneau’s older and larger Episcopal congregation, The Church of the Holy Trinity. Following a hiatus in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the congregation began meeting again, eventually taking the name of St. Brendan the Voyager, a fifth-century Celtic monk.

At its 2019 annual parish meeting, St. Brendan’s leadership asked congregation members to describe in a few words what it was that made them say “wow” about St. Brendan’s. Responses included the people, caring, family life, living our faith, outreach, ministries, congregational events, generous giving from the heart, healthy finances, church facilities, feeling like home, stepping up, projects, healing and praying congregation, music, engaging and welcoming, open attitude, warm, and accepting. Of interest for this paper is that none of the responses were specific to what we believe; they were very much about how we behave – how we express what we believe.

¹⁸ St. Brendan’s Episcopal Church, *2019 Annual Report*.

Chapter 2: Theological Diversity

What Is Theological Diversity?

For purposes of this project, I have defined theology as simply discourse about God, and I have shared that definition with each interviewee, stressing simplicity and accessible language rather than complex analysis and academic terminology. When interviewees have asked follow-up questions about theology, I have responded with St. Anselm's definition of theology as faith seeking understanding, a definition that has been consistently well-received. Diversity, of course, is variety. Theological diversity is thus the variety of ways that faith can find understanding or one can have discourse about the divine. It is heterogeneity of thought and belief.

Theological diversity in the context of real life in general and the life of the church is made infinitely more complex because it is informed by the entire history of Christianity and culture in general, thus carrying on its back the burdens of bias, of our individual and collective joys and fears, and all the baggage of centuries of questions and opinions. For some, theological diversity is synonymous with heresy. Theologian and Evangelical Church Alliance minister Dan Jensen, for example, asserts not only that Christianity is the only true faith in the world but also that it is only a specific kind of Christianity, the biblical variety, that is "the one true religion."¹⁹ Jensen further asserts that biblical Christianity – defined as that based on a literal reading of the Bible as inerrant historical fact, and an understanding of its directives as inviolable law that transcend time and culture – is completely objective and not open to interpretation, and that any who disagree with this understanding are not Christian, regardless of what they may profess.²⁰

¹⁹ Dan Jensen, *A False Kind of Christianity: A Conservative Evangelical Refutation of Progressive Christianity* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2017), 125.

²⁰ Jensen, *A False Kind of Christianity*, 119 and 289.

For others, theological diversity is not so anathema. For many, it offers a potential solution to the decline of the mainline Protestant church. At the opposite end of the spectrum from fundamentalism are apologists such as Brian McLaren, theologian and evangelical minister, who describes Christian fundamentalism's emphasis on orthodoxy and one right way of believing as regressive.²¹ McLaren invites his students and readers to shake off the yolk of unquestioned beliefs and liberate ourselves to find and express God in our lives in new ways that give new or enhanced meaning to our postmodern lives.²²

Between these two extremes are the theologians like Hal Taussig, who discusses the need to inform faith with intellectual integrity.²³ Taussig also addresses how some of our most basic theological positions such as God as a personified and male deity have become barriers to postmodern seekers.²⁴ Felton and Proctor-Murphy illustrate the definition of theological diversity by holding up the example of Jesus who, according to the gospels, regularly declined to answer theological questions, instead providing his listeners with parables or follow-up questions to provide a framework for them to explore theological thinking and find their own, and therefore often diverse, answers.²⁵

Manifestations of Theological Diversity in Church Settings

Felton and Proctor-Murphy discuss the history of the church as one scarred by political intrusion, the outcomes of which was pressure for a unified, protective ideology and theology to the detriment of the experience of God in the world or the adoption of Christ-like behavior. They point out that the role of the creeds in the church, even today, is often one of discouraging

²¹ Brian McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian* (New York: Convergent Books, 2016), x.

²² McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, 198-199.

²³ Taussig, *A New Spiritual Home*, 31.

²⁴ Taussig, *A New Spiritual Home*, 25.

²⁵ Felton and Procter Murphy, *Living the Questions*, 3.

theological diversity, or even the asking of theological questions.²⁶ In particular, they underscore theologian Bernard Brandon Scott's point that prior to the conversion of Constantine and the First Council of Nicaea in 325, Christianity was about uniformity of praxis rather than uniformity of belief.²⁷ However, as the first generation of disciples passed away, the new generations practiced Christianity in an increasingly politicized "us versus them" environment, where "us" became those who think like us, believe like us, and even have the same political allegiances as us. "Us" in this environment increasingly had economic and both personal and communal social agency impacts, especially post-Constantine, as the differences between the professing of Christianity and the politics of the Roman Empire began to blur. Theological diversity became a threat because the church was developing as an ideological institution rather than a body of worshippers with shared praxis and behaviors demonstrating their faith. Theological diversity became heresy, a threat so great to the nascent church that it resulted in schism, sometimes in outright war, and in individual manifestations of theological diversity that were sometimes punishable by death.

In the contemporary mainline Protestant church, theological diversity is no longer so intolerable. However, theological diversity is also not a welcomed topic of discussion. In many cases, it is precisely the discussion about theological diversity that is intolerable. It raises questions that create ambiguity in an environment where we seek and are more comfortable with certainty, or at least with not trying to identify or explore those things that make us uncomfortable, either individually or as a congregation. After all, is diversity not the enemy of unity? Too much questioning of our personal or congregational theology feels somehow like we are not good enough believers. Even outside the church, among the larger culture, the topic makes

²⁶ Felton and Procter Murphy, *Living the Questions*, 180-181.

²⁷ Felton and Procter Murphy, *Living the Questions*, 181.

people uncomfortable, and hence the apocryphal admonition from many of our parents that we should not talk about religion (or politics) in polite company.

It is important to note that this description applies only to the mainline Protestant church. In more fundamentalist churches, the response to questions of theological diversity is that Scripture never changes and therefore beliefs inconsistent with existing fundamentalist dogma are always wrong, period.²⁸ According to Jensen, for example, a true Christian is always “appalled by heresy.”²⁹

Turning now to the individual churches that make up mainline Protestantism, Butler Bass notes that rather than being a unified institution, the church is a community of relationships between members and with God.³⁰ In a community of diverse relationships, it is reasonable to expect diverse perspectives, including diverse theological perspectives. Butler Bass also notes that theological diversity arises from the responses to two basic theological questions: 1) Who are you, God? and 2) Who am I, God?³¹ The answers to those questions will always have differences; “who I am” is not a static construct.

Opportunities and Challenges Presented in Theologically Diverse Communities

The primary opportunity for both churches and individuals in theological diverse communities is the insight into God’s grace that becomes deeper and more personally meaningful when questions are explored rather than suppressed, and when spiritual integrity can be allied with intellectual integrity. In such an environment where new perspectives and questions are welcomed, seekers are also welcomed and can find belonging – and be welcomed and belong as who they are, as seekers, not as potential converts. Jones describes the role of

²⁸ Jensen, *A False Kind of Christianity*, 258.

²⁹ Jensen, *A False Kind of Christianity*, 259.

³⁰ Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 195.

³¹ Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 184-185.

theological diversity in the church as an opportunity to transform the church into the institution that can heal the postmodern disease of loneliness and that can alleviate existential suffering:

By discerning theology as the process by which the human search for meaning is done, we are rediscovering the church's unique reason for being. By emphasizing this inevitable process, rather than being threatened by the theological diversity that characterizes the contemporary church, we can begin to develop a model for the church as we enter the twenty-first century. More than simply tolerating this phenomenon of variegation, we are called to find a way to affirm it gratefully....³²

Surely this is Christ-like behavior.

Felton and Procter Murphy sum up how a one-size-fits-all theology that does not grow in understanding as culture evolves becomes a barrier to the survival of the church, noting that:

People are simply no longer moved by the notion that they are horrible sinners from birth, redeemed only by the sacrifice of an impossibly perfect man at the hands of a tribal, bloodthirsty God. People no longer see the church as the sole keeper of salvation. Seekers of spiritual integrity...are finding their own creative ways to fulfill the deepest longings of their souls, free from the perceived, and often very real, hypocrisy of the church.³³

Leah Schade points out that while diverse theological perspectives can absolutely result in conflict among congregation members, between the congregation and their leaders, and even between the congregation and God, that conflict is not necessarily bad. In fact, Schade posits, if we consider that rather than avoiding or disapproving of theological conflict, God works through such very normal and human conflict to manifest God's self and will, theological conflict and diversity becomes an invitation we should welcome.³⁴ Diana Butler Bass reminds readers that despite the sometimes very recent and inculpative theological fractures among Christians in the

³² Jones, *Worlds within a Congregation*, 16.

³³ Felton and Procter Murphy, *Living the Questions*, 212.

³⁴ Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone*, 80.

postmodern world, theological diversity is nothing new.³⁵ Questions of what we believe have not only played a major role in the creation of the church but are the reason for the schism that resulted in the 1054 AD division of Christianity into Western Catholic and Byzantine Orthodox divisions, and the continuing reason for the further denominationalism of the mainline Protestant church. Speaking specifically about ministry and preaching in churches characterized by politically diverse parishioners, Schade discusses how ministers can approach potentially contentious issues and still engage the spectrum of perspectives in the church.³⁶ The same question applies to theologically diverse congregations, as does the same answer: focus on the questions, not the answers. Diverse perspectives can reveal the underlying “big questions” that give rise to that diversity, and exposing those larger and often shared questions is an invitation to conversation and bridges over differences.³⁷

This is not to say that theologically diverse communities do not present challenges as well as opportunities. Jones points out that the postmodern world is really turning the church on its head. Instead of being the place where one comes to find “the” answer, the church is now the place where one asks questions and discerns a variety of potential answers.³⁸ Instead of being the institution that overwhelmingly influences the larger culture of nations, postmodern culture – and especially the conterminous issue of loneliness being one of the greatest forms of suffering in the Western culture – a larger and much more diverse postmodern culture now overwhelmingly influences the church.³⁹

³⁵ Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 201.

³⁶ Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone*, 2.

³⁷ Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone*, 185-186.

³⁸ Jones, *Worlds within a Congregation*, 17.

³⁹ Jones, *Worlds within a Congregation*, 16.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the fundamentalist Christian church, which asserts that orthodoxy is absolutely static, derived from an immutable and divinely written Scriptural canon, from which any diversion or interpretive effort is heresy, or the “repugnant” refusal to submit to Scripture.⁴⁰ The person who questions dogma or denies the existence of the essential truth of doctrines is neither Christian nor subject to salvation, according to the Evangelical Church Alliance’s spokesperson Jensen, and true Christians should be appalled at the concept of theological diversity having value.⁴¹

So what then is the situation of the mainline Protestant church today, in terms of the opportunities and challenges associated with a growing culture of theological diversity? Jones presents the concept of the true test of one’s theology as a Christian as its “livability.”⁴² He notes that theological diversity appears even among the Gospels themselves,⁴³ and surely the myriad ways of understanding the Gospel of Christ in no way undercuts the centrality of Christ to Christians. Jones sums up the contemporary opportunity and challenge, noting that today’s theological explorers are finding individual approaches unsatisfying, failing to meet their need for community and acceptance, but nevertheless are claiming to be spiritual, if not religious.⁴⁴

Applying this observation to that population paints a portrait of seekers who describe themselves as spiritual-but-not-religious as hungry for a community within which they can safely explore diverse questions and profess diverse beliefs and understanding. The church – religion – can provide them with a vocabulary, framework and community for understanding and interpreting their lived experience in a Christian culture, and for sharing with others the joy of

⁴⁰ Jensen, *A False Kind of Christianity*, 254-255.

⁴¹ Jensen, *A False Kind of Christianity*, 256-257.

⁴² Jones, *Worlds within a Congregation*, 36.

⁴³ Jones, *Worlds within a Congregation*, 35.

⁴⁴ Jones, *Worlds within a Congregation*, 82.

finding meaning, which I assert is worship. Jones says that offering this community is contemporary evangelism, and that “effective evangelism is identical with the rediscovery of the Church’s reason for being.”⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Jones, *Worlds within a Congregation*, 82.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

“The Episcopal Church is near collapse,” screeches one headline, which gets the reader’s attention but is not particularly shocking in light of the current data on the decline in church attendance.⁴⁶ Although the source of this blog headline is hardly academic, the data are compelling and consistent across sources. Beliefnet, for example, reports that among the mainline Protestant denominations, membership in the Episcopal Church declined by over 30% in the 1990s.⁴⁷ Another religion blog, Juicyecumenism.com, describes the Episcopal Church as “skidding downhill” with a sustained decline that is close to two million individuals just since 2016. The same blog reports that over 70% of individual Episcopal churches now have membership of fewer than 100 individuals.⁴⁸

It is clear that the decline in church-going among Protestants is significant and sustained, with Gallup reporting a 20 percentage point decline since the 1950s, relative to its question about religious service attendance in the most recent week.⁴⁹ Similarly, the Pew Research Center reports that the number of Americans identifying as religiously unaffiliated has increased from 16% in 2007 to 23% in 2015.⁵⁰ The Gallup analysis points out that the situation of decline in attendance is likely greater than what is reported due to the survey methodology used to collect attendance information, noting that surveyed Americans tend to overstate their church attendance.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Beliefnet, “Why is the Episcopal Church Near Collapse?” Beliefnet.com. <https://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/home-news-and-views/why-is-the-episcopal-church-near-collapse?p=3>, 1.

⁴⁷ Beliefnet, 1.

⁴⁸ Jeffrey Walton, “Episcopal Church Still Skidding Downhill,” *The Institute on Religion and Democracy*, September 21, 2017, <https://juicyecumenism.com/2017/09/21/episcopal-membership>.

⁴⁹ Frank Newport, “Church Leaders and Declining Religious Service Attendance,” *Gallup News*, September 7, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/242015/church-leaders-declining-religious-service-attendance.aspx>.

⁵⁰ Pew Research Center, “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious,” *Religion and Public Life*, November 3, 2015, www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/.

⁵¹ Newport, “Church Leaders.”

That tendency notwithstanding, the share of Americans reporting no religious affiliation is rising, with Millennials reported as having the greatest rejection of the organized church, at 35%.⁵² Forbes Magazine reports that the fastest-growing religious affiliation reported in the United States is that of no religious affiliation, and that this category represents the largest religious affiliation among younger citizens.⁵³ Of interest is that the numbers are rising across demographic groups and among both major American political parties, as well as among college graduates and those without degrees. Also of interest and potentially a subject for future research, is that those who report no religious affiliation also report decreased economic success, decreased family stability, and increased pessimism, as compared to those who self-report at churchgoers.⁵⁴

Of interest relative to this paper is the finding by the Pew Research Center that the majority of Americans reporting no religious affiliation nevertheless report believing in God.⁵⁵ The same research also posits that Americans may be becoming more spiritual, with a majority reporting regular spiritual experiences such as a sense of spiritual well-being or wonder. Moreover, these experiences are reported by both the religiously affiliated and the non-affiliated.⁵⁶

Journalist Eric Reed considers recent Barna Group research into the reasons young people leave the church, noting that fully one fourth of people under 30 find that the church is

⁵² Peter Beinart, "Breaking Faith," *The Atlantic*, April 2017, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/04/breaking-faith/517785/.

⁵³ Chris Ladd, "Organized Religion is Being Replaced by Disorganized Religion," *Forbes*, March 30, 2017, www.forbes.com/sites/chrisladd/2017/03/30/organized-religion-is-being-replaced-by-disorganized-religion/#6e062f6d489c.

⁵⁴ Beinart, "Breaking Faith."

⁵⁵ Michael Lipka, "More Americans Now Say They're Spiritual but Not Religious," Pew Research Center, September 6, 2017, www.Pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/, 6.

⁵⁶ Lipka, "More Americans," 7.

not just incompatible with today's culture but "demonizes" modern culture outside the church, with an even larger group citing the church as excluding modern science.⁵⁷ The Barna Group research also finds that young people feel unsafe expressing doubts in the church, despite also reporting having doubts they would like to discuss.

According to the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), almost one-fifth of Americans identify as spiritual-but-not-religious;⁵⁸ and the Pew Research Center estimates that number to be a little higher, at 27%.⁵⁹ Differentiating between being spiritual and being religious requires a definition of each. Northwestern University's Barbara Newman defines spirituality as the practice of attempting to find meaning in one's individual life. Religion, on the other hand, is discussed as the communal life arising from a community internalization of beliefs and practices associated with a relationship with God – the collective people of God, as distinct from an individual of God.⁶⁰ Newman also makes the intriguing point relative to cultural change in America that "not long ago, the notion of spirituality without religion would have made as much sense as a roof without a building."⁶¹ The larger point, however, is that spirituality is private, and religion is public or communal.

Boston University sociologist Nancy Ammerman notes that in the contemporary United States, we have framed spirituality in such a way that it is presented as an alternative to organized religion, rather than as something that is part of religion.⁶² In an effort "to unpack the black box of

⁵⁷ Eric Reed, "Six Reasons Young People Leave the Church," *Christianity Today*, Winter 2012, www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2012/winter/youngleavechurch.html.

⁵⁸ Robert P. Jones, Daniel Cox, and Art Raney, "Searching for Spirituality in the U.S.: A New Look at the Spiritual but Not Religious," Public Religion Research Institute, 2017, prri.org/research/religiosity-and-spirituality-in-america/, 1.

⁵⁹ Lipka, "More Americans," 7.

⁶⁰ Barbara Newman, "On Being Spiritual But Not (yet? ever?) Religious," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 10, no. 2 (2010): 282-287, <https://muse.jhu.edu/>, 285.

⁶¹ Newman, "On Being Spiritual," 285.

⁶² Nancy T. Ammerman, "Spiritual but Not Religious? Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 52, no 2 (2013): 258–78.

spirituality,” Ammerman finds that the boundaries of “spiritual but not religious” are defined by those who identify with that category as primarily moral and political.⁶³ This group may include theistic believers, existential seekers who have not committed to any specific belief system, and those who embrace alternative belief systems. The commonality is that this group in general rejects the organized church as the vehicle for exploring their spirituality or for growing spiritually.

Another sociologist, Orestes Hastings at the University of California, posits that the American value of individualism and the recent phenomenon of diminished social engagement have set the stage for the spiritual-but-not-religious movement.⁶⁴ Like Ammerman, Hastings raises questions about the boundaries of the spiritual-but-not-religious identification, underscoring the need for some sort of taxonomy of private spiritualities. He also notes the myriad of research findings related to the correlations between social connectedness and satisfaction with life or personal wellbeing, and he raises the question of the impact of the lack of participation in the group worship that characterizes organized religion on the well-being of the spiritual-but-not-religious.⁶⁵

Janet Ruffing of Yale Divinity School proposes that one of the major challenges for the contemporary church is ministry to the “postmodern self,” which she describes as characterized by fragmentation, oversaturation or emptiness, all of which result in spiritual isolation and often in general lack of coherence.⁶⁶ In discussion of personality theory and creation of identity, Ruffing asserts that a person’s spiritual identity is in and of itself relational on multiple levels: it is a relationship with the self; it is a relationship with a spiritual community with whom one

⁶³ Ammerman, “Spiritual but Not Religious?” 275.

⁶⁴ Orestes P. Hastings, “Not a Lonely Crowd? Social Connectedness, Religious Service Attendance, and the Spiritual but Not Religious,” *Social Science Research* 57 (2016): 63.

⁶⁵ Hastings, “Not A Lonely Crowd?” 64.

⁶⁶ Janet K. Ruffing, “Spiritual Identity and Narrative: Fragmentation, Coherence, and Transformation,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 12, no. 1 (2012): 64-65.

shares intimacy, meaning, and service; and it is, of course, a relationship with God.⁶⁷ She further asserts that essential to finding coherence and meaning is participation in a corporate spiritual identity, with Christianity being a fundamentally relational faith.⁶⁸ This understanding requires the church to provide a corporate spiritual praxis that integrates spirituality with religion and reframes the church as a source of meaningful and welcoming community of existential seekers, rather than an outdated and exclusivist arbiter of truth.

Late Episcopal theologian Marcus Borg summarized mainline Protestantism's struggle by discussing how our sacred text itself often seems at odds with contemporary culture:

In the last half century, probably more Christians have left the church because of the Bible than for any other single reason. More precisely, they left because the earlier paradigm's way of seeing the Bible ceased to make sense to them. Contemporary biblical literalism – with its emphasis on biblical infallibility, historical factuality, and moral and doctrinal absolutes – is an obstacle for millions of people.⁶⁹

Here we find the crux of the conundrum: we humans need spiritual community and the church needs members, but the church is perceived – rightly, sometimes, and wrongly, other times – to be mired in a world of the past and irrelevant to contemporary community.

Sociologists Andrew Mannheimer and Terrence Hill report three interesting findings related to the conundrum and to the valuing of theological diversity. First, they note that there is a large body of research documenting that involvement with a religious community is correlated positively with favorable mental health for participants.⁷⁰ Second, they find that religious isolation, characterized by “religious doubts, feeling abandoned by God, [or] negative

⁶⁷ Ruffing, “Spiritual Identity and Narrative,” 69.

⁶⁸ Ruffing, “Spiritual Identity and Narrative,” 71.

⁶⁹ Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (33New York: HarperOne, 2003), 43.

⁷⁰ Andrew H. Mannheimer and Terrence D. Hill, “Deviating from Religious Norms and the Mental Health of Conservative Protestants,” *Journal of Religion and Health*, 54, no. 5 (October 2014): 1826.

interactions with the church” may cause psychological distress and is correlated with less favorable mental health.⁷¹ Of significant interest for this paper, however, is the third factor, their report that while findings differ somewhat across religious groups, “deviating from normative patterns of prayer,” and in some cases religious deviance in general, was not associated with psychological distress.⁷² In other words, theological diversity and diversity of praxis did not appear to be a barrier to the favorable psychological outcomes of religious participation.

Christopher Bader and Paul Froese, also sociologists, note that one of the challenges facing the modern church is simply identifying theological diversity. Contemporary American Christian culture tends to identify Christians by their denomination, but as Bader and Froese point out, not only do denominational differences wax and wane (perhaps as a result of larger cultural influences?), but many church-goers are not able to clearly articulate denominational differences.⁷³ Noting the “immense variation in theology and practice among groups that fall under a generic label,” they propose that an alternative to classifying Christians according to their denominations is to categorize individuals on the basis of their religious beliefs and not their affiliations.⁷⁴ They further posit that since individuals within a congregation might not share the same theological perspectives, categorizing them on the basis of denomination is essentially applying the theology of the group to an individual who may not espouse or even understand that theology. One proposed solution is measuring beliefs about God, to “bypass the assumption that the group’s theology is fully instilled in the individual and allow for differences within

⁷¹ Mannheimer and Hill, “Deviating from Religious Norms,” 827.

⁷² Mannheimer and Hill, “Deviating from Religious Norms,” 1835.

⁷³ Christopher Bader and Paul Froese, “Images of God: The Effect of Personal Theologies on Moral Attitudes, Political Affiliation, and Religious Behavior,” *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, 1, no 11 (2005): 2.

⁷⁴ Bader and Froese, “Images of God,” 3-4.

denominations,” especially when denomination theology may be culturally and historically specific.⁷⁵

Bader and Froese’s research demonstrates that individual theological perspective differs not only among religious groups but within religious groups.⁷⁶ That is, theological diversity is present but not always recognized, with that lack of recognition a detriment to individuals and to the group. Outside the scope of this paper but of interest to research into the larger questions about theological diversity is their point that “God is the object of religion, but researchers have been slow to recognize and demonstrate the fundamental importance of God’s character to religious believers. The more we know about how people view God, the better we will understand how religion affects the world.”⁷⁷

Recent work by South African theologians draws out the question that emerges from research like Bader and Froese’s: “when is diversity still acceptable (still ‘inspired’ truth) and when does it become unacceptable (no longer to be regarded as ‘God’s will’)?”⁷⁸ The University of California’s David MacHacek points out that religious diversity was one of the founding principles of American society, and that evolving American culture increasingly welcomes religious diversity.⁷⁹

Loyola Marymount professor and Catholic priest James Fredericks asserts that to answer the question above, individuals and congregations need to understand not just the theological diversity in the United States today but also actively work to understand its impact on their own

⁷⁵ Bader and Froese, “Images of God,” 4-5.

⁷⁶ Bader and Froese, “Images of God,” 17.

⁷⁷ Bader and Froese, “Images of God,” 21.

⁷⁸ Yolanda Dreyer, et al., “Sola Scriptura: Hindrance or Catalyst for Church Unity?” *Theological Studies*, (2013), http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-94222013000100067, 2.

⁷⁹ David MacHacek, “The Problem of Pluralism,” *Sociology of Religion*, 64 no 2 (Summer 2003): 145.

religious lives.⁸⁰ Moreover, we need to understand theological diversity as expressed within our own Christian religion and as expressed in other religions that are increasingly part of American culture. He notes that “the otherness of another’s religion is often experienced as a threat not only to the comprehensiveness and coherence of one’s own religion but also to its plausibility.”⁸¹

When characteristics of other religions are introduced into our Christian congregations, we also introduce ambiguity, as well as threat to the American Protestant hegemony. Fredericks brings virtue ethics to bear on the situation, suggesting that developing interreligious friendships creates tolerance by eliminating the “the human need to render our enemies faceless in order to hate them.”⁸² Moreover, building structures such as interreligious friendships expands our horizons and informs our own theological growth.⁸³ In other words, theological diversity – including interreligious impacts on Christian thought and praxis – is to be welcomed not just because of the benefit to the holders of non-traditional beliefs, but also because of the larger benefit to all individuals and to the congregation as a whole.

Another sociologist, Jenny Trinitapoli at the University of Texas, quotes a Newsweek 2000 report that describes today’s youth as more spiritual than their parents but less conventionally so, and describes them as assembling “their own religious canon as they would a salad from a salad bar.”⁸⁴ She notes that American Christianity has historically been exclusivist, which makes the growing cultural pluralism and theological diversity a significant dilemma for Christian ministry.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ James L. Fredericks, “Interreligious Friendship: A New Theological Virtue,” *Theological Studies Faculty Works*, 31 (1998): http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac/31, 159.

⁸¹ Fredericks, “Interreligious Friendship,” 171.

⁸² Fredericks, “Interreligious Friendship,” 168.

⁸³ Fredericks, “Interreligious Friendship,” 172.

⁸⁴ Jenny Trinitapoli, “ ‘I Know This Isn’t PC but...’: Religious Exclusivism among U.S. Adolescents,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 48, no 3 (2007): 452.

⁸⁵ Trinitapoli, “ ‘I Know This Isn’t PC’, ” 477.

There are two possible outcome polarities that can emerge from the growing cultural and religious pluralism in a culture that has previously enjoyed hegemony: enlargement of who we are by welcoming theological diversity, or the diminution of who we are by treating the diversity as a threat. Jack Seymour at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary sees only one acceptable answer, and that is to focus on welcoming diversity as part of “the mission of the church to the whole world – to those created as children of God.”⁸⁶ Seymour underscores this view by noting that it recognizes our human interconnections as well as our brokenness, reflecting the “multiple conflicts and commitments that emerge as Christian communities bound by time and place seek to witness and be faithful to the saving presence of the Christ in their lives.”⁸⁷

Sociologist Stephen Merino points out that as recently as the 1960s, scholars thought that contact with other religions erodes one’s own religious beliefs.⁸⁸ Today, however, “...non-Christian faiths are increasingly legitimate ways to be American,”⁸⁹ and “individuals’ theological beliefs hold social significance and have important implications for tolerance.”⁹⁰ Seymour sets out the meaning of theological diversity in relation to cultural pluralism and inclusion:

For Christian theology, the question of diversity involves awareness of theological anthropology, affirmation of the wideness of God’s mission, recognition that faith itself is a community of traditions and practices, resisting the pressure to amalgamate and commodify people, recognition of gifts different cultures bring to faith and ministry, reaching out to understand context within which God’s mission occurs, honoring of particular practices and affirmation that traditions are better understood when seen in the

⁸⁶ Jack L. Seymour, “Addressing and Embodying Diversity in Theological Education,” Diversity in Theological Education, *Association of Theological Schools* (March 2002), <https://www.ats.edu/uploads/resources/publications-presentations/documents/diversity-in-theological-education-folio.pdf>, 2.

⁸⁷ Seymour, “Addressing and Embodying Diversity,” 2.

⁸⁸ Stephen Merino, “Religious Diversity in a ‘Christian Nation’: the Effects of Theological Exclusivity and Interreligious Contact on the Acceptance of Religious Diversity,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 49, no. 2 (June 2010): 233.

⁸⁹ Merino, “Religious Diversity,” 231.

⁹⁰ Merino, “Religious Diversity,” 243.

midst of rather than in contrast to other practices, a hope that God's table can be embodied in communication, justice and mission, and a desire to relate the faith tradition to the contemporary context of ministry.⁹¹

The real question, according to Seymour, is who is welcome?⁹² Claremont School of Theology professor and Episcopal priest Sheryl Kujawa Holbrook asks her students to consider a similar question: Who is my neighbor?"⁹³ Jesus also asked that question.

⁹¹ Seymour, "Addressing and Embodying Diversity," 2.

⁹² Seymour, "Addressing and Embodying Diversity," 3.

⁹³ Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook, *God beyond Borders: Interreligious Learning among Faith Communities* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 50.

Chapter Four: Project Methodology

Project Methodology

This project deploys a case study methodology, focusing on the church I attend, St. Brendan's Episcopal Church in Juneau, Alaska, to identify characteristics that can inform the development of programs and services that are specifically Christian but that also welcome and celebrate theological diversity. To that end, I secured permission from the priest-in-charge and the vestry leadership to conduct the study. The enthusiasm with which my proposal was received by the priest-in-charge and by lay leadership provided immediate validation of my expectation that this was a religious community that welcomed questions and exploration as an opportunity to enhance relationships with God and better understand how the Spirit works in the world today.

I compare the response of the Right Reverend Mark Lattime, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Alaska, when he was visiting St. Brendan's and I mentioned this project to him, to the responses to theological questioning from those church leaders who do not welcome theological diversity in any form. Bishop Lattime welcomed my interest in questioning and indicated interest in knowing how the results informed and strengthened my own Christian faith. In contrast, the response from environments where theological diversity would not be welcome appears that it would be quite different. An example is the assertion of conservative theologian Dan Jensen, in his refutation of progressive Christianity, who points out that "novelty is the enemy of the truth."⁹⁴ Jensen elaborates that Christian theology is indeed absolute and the Scriptures inerrant and literal, and that theology that purports to be Christian but allows for relativity or Scriptural interpretation is aberrant and destructive to the institutional church, which is the place where God works.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Jensen, *A False Kind of Christianity*, xiii.

⁹⁵ Jensen, *A False Kind of Christianity*, xi.

Having confirmed that my project is not just acceptable to the St. Brendan's community but welcomed, I then set about developing a survey instrument that I could administer in the form of an interview with members of the congregation, lay leadership, and clergy at St. Brendan's. I specifically chose the interview format to ensure opportunity for follow-up questions and informal interaction opportunities, with the goal being one-hour face-to-face meetings.

In developing the interview modality specific to this project, I considered both academic and discernment design. Attention to the academic piece required recognizing that case study methodology, although qualitative, nevertheless requires the development of a hypothesis for testing, identification and documentation of assumptions and contextual environments, and rigorous interrogation of existing research findings as they may or may not apply to this project.

Because I am a member of St. Brendan's and this case study specifically relates to the faith community, discernment also played a major role. In providing guidance specific to planning successful projects in religious organizations, pastoral theologian Kathleen Cahalan stresses the importance of discernment, which results in an inquiry being faithful and in specifically seeking to understand what God is doing and how one should respond to God's actions revealed in the project.⁹⁶ Cahalan stresses the importance of recognizing whether the goal of the project is to influence or change what faith community members do.⁹⁷ Such an awareness intersects with the academic research need not to influence the thoughts or behavior of others in this particular project where the goal is to identify the current situation, not to change it.

⁹⁶ Kathleen Cahalan, *Projects That Matter: Successful Planning and Evaluation for Religious Organization* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 89.

⁹⁷ Cahalan, *Projects That Matter*, 16.

The project design included development of specifically open-ended questions, rather than those of the yes/no variety. My goal was to elicit responses that would indicate whether the interviewee was supportive of theological diversity in the church, without directly asking that question. This design would mitigate the risk of inadvertently creating the situation where the answer would always be “yes” simply because the larger St. Brendan’s community – and the more liberal arms of the Episcopal Church in general – welcome theological diversity, and the individual interviewee, consciously or unconsciously, therefore answers in such a way as to ally herself with that larger community.

In developing interview questions, I intentionally asked myself about my own theological beliefs and questions, as well as my own biases in general, recognizing, as theologian and United Church of Christ minister Sarah Drummond points out in her guide to evaluation, the risks of lack of neutrality and validity.⁹⁸ I also considered Drummond’s caveat to the researcher that research models in which, essentially, people are the data, require special attention to examining one’s own objectivity.⁹⁹

Using my case study approach, I interviewed members of the St. Brendan’s congregation and identified a listing of individual and congregational attributes indicative of welcoming theological diversity. That catalog of attributes could then become a tool that may be used to inform the development of programs and services to welcome into the church potential members who are seeking a Christian community that is characterized by a high degree of individual as well as communal spirituality, that welcomes interreligious perspective and praxis in a specifically Christian setting, and that affirms multiple understandings of soteriological doctrine.

⁹⁸ Sarah Drummond, *Holy Clarity: The Practice of Planning and Evaluation* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2009), xix.

⁹⁹ Drummond, *Holy Clarity*, 14-15.

Churches that wish to specifically welcome the “spiritual but not religious” or the spiritually seeking populations – or even those who are not sure if Christianity is their faith – might then use the information from this project in designing programs and doing outreach.

Since this project involved human subjects, I sought and received IRB approval of my data collection plan, and approval was awarded in spring 2020. Key to that approval was obtaining informed consent from interviewees, with my focus on awareness that the goal of informed consent is a form of respect for the research participants.¹⁰⁰ According to theologian and pastoral research expert Tim Sensing, offering this respect includes not just seeking permission but also ensuring participant understanding of their right to withdraw consent at any time, and their understanding of researcher goals.¹⁰¹ In addition are ethical considerations, both professional (having to do with primarily with intellectual honesty) and research (governing interaction between the researcher and the research subjects), and both require detailed consideration in design of the research plan.¹⁰² I thus designed my interview plan to include specific steps to maximize participant spiritual safety by clearly describing project goals and securing informed consent prior to individual participation, and by ensuring all participants were aware they could choose to discontinue participation at any time, for any reason. Participants were made aware that there were no right or wrong answers to the interview questions, and that they were welcome to ask me questions at any time. I also made participants aware of the timeline for project completion, and I learned that participants had great interest in reading the final publication. Finally, out of concern that some of the questions might expose spiritual vulnerability that interviewees could find challenging, I kept in close contact with the priest-in-

¹⁰⁰ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 35.

¹⁰¹ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 35.

¹⁰² Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 32-33.

charge serving St. Brendan's to ensure she was apprised of the project status and available to support any participants who might find themselves with questions or concerns after completing an interview. I also informed participants that local clergy were available to assist them if they did have questions or concerns.

All participants completed a form, either presented at the time of interview or emailed in advance of the interview, ensuring they were aware of the purpose of the project and giving me permission to interview them. They were also provided with a copy of this form, which included information on support resources if their participation raises issues for them. I further made every effort to be completely non-judgmental in my communications with participants, focusing not just on written communications but also on my verbal and non-verbal communications. It was absolutely essential that, to the fullest extent possible, I came to the table without expectations or prejudices.

Specific to participant privacy, I have taken extreme care in documenting my findings to ensure they do not inadvertently describe any individual participant in such a way that the individual might be identified by a casual reader from the church community. St. Brendan's is a small community, and the interviewed group was of course even smaller. I have offered to make a draft of the findings available to all participants, giving them an opportunity to raise any concerns prior to publication of the final findings document. I will host a presentation and question-and-answer session at the church upon finalization of the project.

Returning to the case study methodology, I was guided by Sensing's overarching description of theology as a critical activity, and thus a Doctor of Ministry research project being part of the student's ministry.¹⁰³ As well as being a researcher in my doctoral student role, I am

¹⁰³ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, xxvi.

also a lay preacher at St. Brendan's, among a number of other relationships I have with these individuals who were, as interviewees, the subjects of my research as well as my fellow congregation members.

I chose a case study methodology because my goal in this project is understanding a specific phenomenon, rather than proving or disproving a null hypothesis. I do have a research question, but it is bounded by the specific experience at St. Brendan's, and it seeks to identify potential questions for future research and to develop an in-depth descriptive analysis, rather than to substantiate or refute a specific position. That research question is: What are the characteristics among members at St. Brendan's that can inform the development of programs and services in mainline Protestant churches that are specifically Christian but that also welcome and celebrate theological diversity?

In this project, I apply the four primary qualities of qualitative research¹⁰⁴ in search of an answer to the research question above:

Research Quality	Research Goal
Contextual	Frame the question within the context of St. Brendan's for a specifically narrow but deep study.
Explanatory	Answer the question, specific to the study.
Evaluative	Examine the situation specifically at St. Brendan's and evaluate how it may inform larger studies.
Generative	Identify new opportunities for the church and those it serves.

¹⁰⁴ Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook, "Tips for Interviewing in Qualitative Research (in Practical Theology)," 2018, Claremont, CA: Claremont School of Theology.

Population Surveyed

I interviewed 12 members of St. Brendan's, which comprises representation of 20% of St. Brendan's member households. The current COVID-19 pandemic emergency severely impacted my ability to solicit participants, as well as my ability to interview members. Although my plan had been to conduct all interviews in person, such was not the case with pandemic-mitigation protocols in place. I interviewed five members in person, two via Zoom online video conferencing technology, and five by telephone. The majority of in-person interviews were scheduled in a conference room at the local library due to St. Brendan's being closed and services suspended during the pandemic.

My original plans were to solicit interviewees at the coffee hour after worship each Sunday. However, all in-person church activities were abruptly cancelled in March due to a statewide mandate prohibiting all gatherings,¹⁰⁵ including religious services. I initially decided to delay a month in seeking interviewees, hoping that in-person activities would resume. However, when it became clear that was not the case, it became necessary to contact potential interviewees via telephone and email.

Responses to my solicitation of individuals interested in interviewing were dismal, with only two individuals contacting me. When it was originally announced in church that I was working on this project and would be seeking interviewees, a number of congregation members contacted me saying they would like to participate. I even had to say no to contacts from several members of other churches who indicated they had heard about the project and were interested in

¹⁰⁵ State of Alaska, "Health Alert 11: Religious Services," Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Juneau, Alaska, April 7, 2020, http://dhss.alaska.gov/News/Documents/press/2020/SOA_04072020_HealthAlert011_ReligiousServices.pdf.

participating, explaining that the case study was limited to members of the congregation at St. Brendan's.

In response to my questions about the apparently sudden reluctance to participate in interviews, I learned of two important reasons for this reluctance. The first was simply that people were extremely concerned about meeting face-to-face due to the pandemic emergency. The second, of particular interest, was that potential interviewees very much preferred to meet in person, as compared to telephonically or virtually.

However, due to statewide restrictions, public meeting places were not available, nor were restaurants, and the church remained closed. Outdoor meetings were not possible due to Juneau's particularly poor spring weather, with wind and rain almost every day and high temperatures only in the 50s. Restrictions on certain gatherings were partially lifted in June, making libraries available, and most of the interviews for this project were thus held in one of the meeting rooms of the Juneau Public Library.

Prior to the libraries opening, or in cases where the interviewee was not able to come to the library, I conducted by telephone. These interviews were not nearly as robust as those conducted in person, with much shorter answers to questions, fewer follow-up questions and comments from participants, and an overall reduction in interview time. Telephone interviews lasted 15 to 30 minutes, compared to almost 60 minutes for in-person interviews. As someone who regularly conducts interviews in my professional life, I am very aware of the detriment to interview depth when non-verbal communications such as eye contact, kinesics, proxemics, and even just volume of speech are either impaired or absent.

When I commented on this to interviewees and noted to potential interviewees that my preference was in-person or Zoom interviews whenever possible, I was surprised to learn that

interviewees themselves were not comfortable with telephone interviews. Several commented about the sensitivity of the subject matter of the interviews, indicating concern that it was not appropriate for an environment that impeded ability to interact deeply, and some indicating that they had concern about becoming emotional and not wanting that to happen over the telephone. They uniformly indicated that discussion of spirituality was something that evoked both anticipation and trepidation, and that their expectation that the interview would result in strong feelings or questions also made it important to them to meet face-to-face. Several individuals have indicated willingness to interview once the pandemic subsides, but all evidence at the time of this writing (summer 2020) is that the pandemic will not subside in time for additional interviews to be included in this project.

To encourage participation, the priest-in-charge sent the following email to all member of the congregation:

Dear Friends in Christ:

You may recall that in the last Navigator, I included information about Stephanie Butler's doctoral thesis project, which includes interviewing members of the congregation about how they experience God at St. Brendan's.

Stephanie interviewed me [today](#) and the experience was wonderful. Her questions are deep and thoughtful and she is an excellent listener. I encourage each of you to participate in this project. I think you will find it very helpful in your own faith formation. We are not often asked about our beliefs and our faith experience, so this is an opportunity for you to explore your own beliefs.

Please contact Stephanie and offer to participate in her project. I am sure she will find a time and place that works for you, and she is careful about social distancing. You can email her at sbutler@alaska.net and her phone is 907-209-5885.

Sent from

Caroline F. Malseed

Despite the unexpected impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, I am nevertheless pleased with having representation from over 1/5 of the households in the St. Brendan's membership directory, and with the diversity of the interviewed population. The group ranged in age from 20s to 80s, and four were men. Interviewees also included representatives with both liberal and conservative theological perspectives and political or cultural views. The group included cradle Episcopalians, converts from other denominations, and those reluctant to define themselves by denominational affiliation. I am extremely grateful for their time and their willingness to be vulnerable, and most of all for everything they taught me through their sharing.

During the process of doing the fieldwork, I regularly discussed my project with groups and individuals other than the case study population, such as a local book study group and friends. I discovered that there was a surprising level of appetite to participate and I had to decline offers to interview from a number of individuals who did not attend St. Brendan's, and some of whom did not attend church or did not identify as Christian. When I inquired about the reason for their interest, several indicated a desire to discuss spirituality and theological diversity, which they perceived as a generally taboo subject area but one they thought needed discussion in order to normalize the topic. They also indicated attraction to the idea of discussing their spiritual fears and theological questions with someone who did not have an agenda to change or judge their perspective, or even to attempt to answer the questions – just to hear them.

Interviewing such a wide range of individuals, and individuals who are not affiliated with St. Brendan's is outside the scope of this case study. However, the appetite for such discussion among so many different groups indicates a need potentially worth exploring in future research, and may be germane to contemporary questions about how the church can better meet individuals' spiritual and religious needs.

Interview Question Development

The full set of questions is included as Appendix I to this document. I began by noting all the questions I thought would inform an understanding of theological diversity at St. Brendan's but soon found myself with over 40 questions. The challenge quickly became how to develop a set of questions that would capture interviewee's spirituality and theological diversity and the role of St. Brendan's in providing an environment welcoming of such diversity and in mediating spiritual exploration, while also keeping interview time to a reasonable length.

The first sieve through which I filtered these questions was conversation with fellow Doctor of Ministry students during the January 2020 Claremont School of Theology intensive at Willamette University. We met in small groups to discuss our doctoral project dilemmas, with students who were just finishing their degrees sharing their experiences with those of us still completing fieldwork or writing documentation. Three pieces of advice proved particularly valuable in scoping down my interview questions:

- 1) Frame questions in the positive. What do you say "yes" to rather than what do you say "no" to?
- 2) Look for overlap and pathways rather than for binaries. How do the questions and responses fit together to reveal a picture? How do they converge rather than how do they diverge? How do the questions draw out different theological perspectives and questions, rather than how do they highlight the difference between opposite poles?
- 3) Develop the interview as a series of invitations to go deeper, rather than a series of discrete questions.

Applying this advice provided a lens to expose the most important questions, and to eliminate or re-frame those that were subordinate or that constricted rather than expanded the

conversation. For example, multiple questions about theodicy and about other challenging concepts became one much broader question, asking “What theological questions, if any, do you grapple with?” Complex questions about the relationships between various ministries and spiritual practices and the inter-relationality with the embodied self became simply “How does St. Brendan’s feed your spirit?”

Particularly valuable in interview instrument design was Swinton and Mowat’s guidebook on design in practical theology, and their stress on the importance of words, contexts, culture and personal reflection, rather than simply theory, in both developing questions and understanding responses.¹⁰⁶ In his guide for Doctor of Ministry students, Sensing underscores that the findings from the doctoral project are but one account of the situation, seen through the researcher’s particular and individual lens.¹⁰⁷ Although Sensing is specifically addressing findings, the observation – and caution – applies also to question design.

Ultimately, although there are many questionnaires available online, I developed my own set of 10 questions, based on my knowledge of the St. Brendan’s community and on my desire to specifically identify relationships, if any, between St. Brendan’s and tolerance for theological diversity. I grouped the questions into a set of four questions about St. Brendan’s, to identify what it is about St. Brendan’s as a religious home that attracts and retains the interviewees; two questions about spirituality, to identify the interviewee’s assessment of her own spirituality; and four questions about theology, to identify theologically diverse perspectives among interviewees, as well as tolerance for theological diversity.

45. ¹⁰⁶ J. Swinton and H. Mowatt, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2016),

¹⁰⁷ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 44.

Sensing's caveats to the researcher informed my consideration of validity and reliability of the findings arising from responses to the interview instrument. Unlike quantitative measures where mathematical testing of finding accuracy is possible, tests of validity in a qualitative case study are more conceptual than concrete. Sensing points out that validation in such a setting occurs from consistency in the application of the research intervention or tool, from the researcher's understanding of the topic and of her own biases that may impact her conclusions, and from the credibility of the conclusions the researcher draws from the participants' responses.¹⁰⁸ I applied these practices to the interview instrument in this project by prefacing my questions to interviewees with information about my goals for this research and the fact that there were no right or wrong answers, and I ensured that both the introductory material and the questions were communicated in the same way and in the same order to all interviewees.

Turning to reliability, I ensured that I took very detailed notes of all conversations. In some cases, this resulted in long pauses as most interviewees spoke more quickly than I could write. On occasion, if I was not confident that I had accurately captured a response, I read my notes back to the interviewee for confirmation or correction. I opted not to record interviews based on potential interviewee clear discomfort with the idea of being recorded. The questions that arose from congregants early in research design as I discussed potentially recording interviews made it clear that individuals would be more relaxed and less concerned with perception or with risk of loss of confidentiality – and thus less candid – if they were recorded.

The final 10 interview questions elicited a rich set of responses from which some clear themes – both expected and surprising – emerged.

¹⁰⁸ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 204-205.

Chapter Five: Project Findings

Interview Results

The interviews resulted in a wide variety of discussion. That discussion emerged as responses to specific interview questions and as a variety of segues into theological questions that were outside the scope of the interview. Although all interviewees were members of St. Brendan's, they collectively represented a great deal of religious diversity.

One person did not identify as a Christian, two interviewees described belief in reincarnation as what happens after death, and seven described mystical experiences that transformed their understanding of God or their spiritual lives. Although none were former Catholics, seven described an attraction to the ritual and mysticism they observed in the Catholic Church. The seven each indicated that one of the attractions of the Episcopal Church was its "high church" emphasis on tradition, ritual, sacramental grace, and history, without adopting social or political positions that they found personally unpalatable. Another interviewee who came to the Episcopal Church from an eastern Christian background discussed the attraction of a Eucharistic theology that was liberal and welcoming of all at the Lord's Table.

Despite the diversity of interview results, one clearly overarching response was consistent in all the interviews, and it was also the only consistent response. That response was identification as one of the most attractive and important feature of interviewees' relationship with St. Brendan's as the emphasis on community – relationships with people. Interviewees all commented that placing the emphasis on the value of all people provides a setting where differences become subordinate to relationships, and where human diversity is thus not merely accepted but is welcomed and sought as an opportunity to grow into enhanced community. The

opportunity to grow was seen as a spiritual invitation as well as an invitation to deeper community.

Also raised by all interviewees was the importance of acting on the congregation's value of community and human relationships that cross cultural boundaries. Interviewees cited St. Brendan's ministries as transformational in terms of transcending cultural differences, and particularly religious differences, and feeling that they were acting on their faith and doing something important to others. Several interviewees cited St. Brendan's Galley, a weekly event to serve a free hot meal to the larger Juneau community, and attended largely by the homeless or impoverished. A key feature of the Galley is engagement of St. Brendan's members in dining and interacting on a person-to-person level with those individuals typically identified as "other": the homeless, the non-Christian, and the addicted, among a variety of qualities of other-ness.

A second event brought up by the majority of interviewees as an example of how St. Brendan's feeds their spirits and how it brings together people who experience Christian spirituality in different ways, was coffee hour, an informal light lunch served family style to members after Sunday worship service. One interviewee described coffee hour at St. Brendan's as different from similar events at other congregations in that "it taught me that there is more to worship than the religious connection." Another described coffee hour as "an extension of the worship service" by putting teachings and values into immediate practice.

Interviewees described both coffee hour and the Galley as creating a sense of community and caring for/being cared for by others, and as a demonstration of Jesus's teachings, placing the emphasis on how one behaves, rather than what one believes or how one worships, as being key to Christian community. Participation in events that demonstrate caring for others was described as fundamental to how St. Brendan's feeds members' spirits as well as mediates their

relationship with God, by translating Christian faith from something you believe into something you do. Faith is thus an action.

Several members were quick to point out that this experience at St. Brendan's of community and relationships with people, both within and outside of the religious community, was an expression of worship that transcends theological questions or differences. However, they noted that it is not one that is imposed on others. They emphasized in responding to the question about what made them choose and stay at St. Brendan's that they felt welcomed without feeling intruded upon. A word that appeared repeatedly in descriptions was "comfortable."

Related to their personal feelings of welcome, every interviewee described desire to respect differences in theological positions among members or visitors, despite the absence of any interview question specifically soliciting that information. This was one of the most consistent themes: tolerance of difference was consistently and highly valued in welcoming others and making them comfortable.

Returning to personal experience, one interviewee discussed the stress of dealing with the clear unwelcome of her crying baby at the church she attended prior to St. Brendan's, and the inability to give herself to worship in that stressful setting, saying "I felt so far away from God." She contrasted that to the St. Brendan's community and its specific welcome of children, which described as "a restart" of her relationship with God. Another described St. Brendan's as a place where it is acceptable to have questions or be in different places theologically because conversation about differences is welcomed and is positive, seen as something that enhances the larger community. As one interviewee pointed out, "It's not about me; it's about us." Another member summed up her responses to the questions specifically about St. Brendan's, saying "It's so freakin' simple. God is God, and I am not God and you are not God. But together we are on

the same journey and together we come closer to God. Diversity is part of the enchantment of St. Brendan's: people I would never know otherwise know love me and I love them."

Seven interviewees specifically mentioned clergy as key to their experience of community at St. Brendan's. Interestingly, four different clergy members are mentioned, all from different times in St. Brendan's history, but always in terms of being welcoming without being overwhelming. Three interviewees mentioned that several clergy members at St. Brendan's had gone through painful life experiences and that they reached out to members of congregation for support and sustenance, which the congregation experienced as a powerful building of community and opportunity to make both a collective and individual difference. Congregation members felt empowered and valued by being invited to share in navigating the pain. Although none of the interviewees specifically mentioned theology of the cross, my distinct impression from their comments was an impression of privilege in being invited to share in suffering, and in that sharing enlarging their connectedness to humanity and to the divine.

Also specific to clergy, three members cited current Priest-in-Charge Rev. Malseed's homilies as playing a role in building a community at St. Brendan's that transcends theological diversity. One member expressed appreciation for her focus on behaviors as a hallmark of Christianity, rather than beliefs. Another indicated that Rev. Malseed's homilies make it clear that she doesn't think she knows the answers to many theological questions – and thus does not say there is any right or wrong answers – but that she demonstrates that it is possible to be comforted by and find meaning precisely in the theological ambiguity that some other religious leaders and institutions find threatening.

Following is a list of the interview questions, with a summary of the responses and discussion of the potential role of the situations described in demonstrating theological diversity

at St. Brendan's or creating tolerance for theological diversity. It is important to note that in a case study, and especially in one where the sample size is small, selection bias colors the responses. Interviewees self-selected by volunteering to participate in this study. Thus, although my experience tells me this interviewed population is generally representative of the larger population at St. Brendan's, there were no scientific controls to ensure the population interviewed was actually representative of the larger population at St. Brendan's. The research goal of this project is exploratory, to identify a starting point for deeper and broader analysis of characteristics of congregations that welcome theological diversity, rather than designed to scientifically prove or refute a hypothesis.

How does St. Brendan's feed your spirit?

Nine responses focused on community, with several describing the community as a family. Two responses focused on praxis, with one related to Eucharist and the other to liturgy. One response specifically cited diversity of perspectives. Several responses mentioned the St. Brendan's coffee hour after church as being part of the worship experience due to its role in creating a sense of family and of belonging. Also related to the sense of family and belonging was participation in shared ministries.

Personal involvement in doing things for others was key to feeling positive about one's community, and several specifically mentioned St. Brendan's ministries that involve person-to-person interaction with others, such as the Galley dinner.¹⁰⁹ Meaningful exposure to people who may often be shunned, such as building personal relationships with homeless people, raises questions about God using us to communicate love to others, and about who shares in the

¹⁰⁹ The Galley is a program that serves a weekly hot meal to the homeless and invites all members to share a table with and interact with the homeless.

Kingdom of God, and seemed to have sparked some of the later comments about universalist beliefs.

What role, if any, has St. Brendan's had in mediating or influencing your relationship with God?

Ten responses discussed other people as a conduit to God, and one specifically cited developing positive relationships with others as a form of worshipping God. All responses focused on the mutuality of benefits derived from diverse relationships, with several noting that an expanded diverse community also expanded their understanding of God. Interviewees noted that other people, especially those with differing perspectives, expand the understanding of God when those people are in loving relationship with each other and with a larger community. A vision of all people as belonging and being worthy of love, and of salvific grace in particular, builds a welcoming of theological diversity, among other values.

What made you choose St. Brendan's, and what makes you stay at St. Brendan's?

The reasons for choosing St. Brendan's were varied, although several interviewees were specifically looking for a theologically liberal spiritual home. Reasons for staying at St. Brendan's, however, were uniformly related to the people there, with emphasis again on the sense of community. In addition to comments about community, two interviewees specifically mentioned music, and two mentioned the community's valuing of children. Two members also referenced religious practices, with one emphasizing Eucharist and one the liturgy in the Book of Common Prayer.

Several interviewees specifically mentioned Rev. Malseed as key to their choice to become members of St. Brendan's, noting her liberal theology and simultaneous care not to communicate that any specific belief or practice was better than another. Although not

specifically articulated, comments painted a picture of a sense of comfort that St. Brendan's is a place where members are welcomed for who they are, now, not who they might become.

How does St. Brendan's bring together people who experience Christian spirituality in different ways?

Responses here emphasized being welcoming of all, and several mentioned that non-Christians fully participate in a number of events. All responses emphasized the St. Brendan's ministries. It appears that emphasis on shared behaviors over shared beliefs results in a sense of community and purpose that overrides differences and builds community from diversity.

Are you spiritual or religious or both? Why do you say that?

Five interviewees said spiritual, one said religious, four said both, and one preferred not to be categorized. One responded with an indirect answer and more questions. The comments emphasized the importance of feeling God's presence, and the importance of community to spiritual growth.

Here again community overrides the challenges of diversity, with interviewees emphasizing the importance of connection to others in expressing their spirituality. Several interviewees described personal mystical experiences that both strengthened their faith and compelled them to want to share their experience and their associated joy with others, but not to proselytize or try to change others' beliefs.

How does your life experience impact your understanding of God?

Responses to this question were very diverse, with interviewees describing very different personal experiences that impacted their understanding of God. However, interviewees uniformly saw their experiences, even painful ones, as gifts that expanded their understanding of God in ways that could not have been achieved without direct personal experience. In all cases,

the impact on their understanding of God was positive, expanding awareness of God's love and presence in their lives and in community.

The goal of this question was to assess whether life experience expanded tolerance for theological diversity. The responses seemed to indicate that life experiences, and especially painful experiences and mystical experiences, expand tolerance for theological diversity by subordinating many lesser questions to a limited number of "big" theological understandings such as the universality of God's love and the presence of the Holy Spirit across space and time. Moreover, the responses indicate that surviving painful experiences or having mystical experience seems to expand comfort with theological ambiguity, with interviewees indicating growing awareness that they as humans can never understand God, but that understanding of God is not necessary to experiencing the love of God. Increased tolerance for theological ambiguity in the responses appears to accompany increased tolerance for theological diversity, with interviewees not focused on right or wrong but on love and absence/longing, and similar larger experiential and ultimately existential questions.

What are some examples of theological questions you grapple with (if any)?

The majority of interviewees reported struggling with Christian doctrine of exclusivism as distinct from universal salvation. Interviewees also mentioned the problem of theodicy, and a variety of Christian doctrines such as virgin birth and physical resurrection. Three interviewees responded that they no longer struggle with theological questions and are willing to accept that they cannot, in this life, know the answers. Thus, the struggle becomes one of acceptance of a limited, imperfect self. One interviewee discussed difficult doctrines as arising from Pauline theology rather than the example of Christ, and the need to focus on Christ's behaviors as examples to inform the answers to theological questions. At the opposite pole, another

interviewee discussed the Bible as inerrant, factual history that may be used to answer theological questions. This same interviewee, however, expressed conviction that salvation was available to non-Christians as well as Christians, if they demonstrated Biblical values.

The goal of this question was to identify how interviewees responded to their own internal theological questions and struggles. Interestingly, while it exposed considerable theological diversity relative to internal questions, it also exposed considerable tolerance for ambiguity as a solution to processing difficult theological questions.

Who goes to heaven? Who goes to hell?

Although two interviewees stated strong belief in heaven and hell as places where life continues after death, neither believed that heaven was available only to Christians. They both stressed that it is what is in the heart that determines whether one goes to heaven or hell, not one's religion. One interviewee discussed persistence of the self after death and confidence in an afterlife, but there was not a connection to heaven or hell as they are commonly understood. The other nine interviewees believed that heaven and hell are essentially states of being that humans create for ourselves by our choice to experience God or to isolate ourselves from the divine. Noteworthy was that two interviewees voiced belief in reincarnation as how the soul persists after death. When pressed for more information, both discussed an eventually opportunity, after learning through multiple incarnations, to take on a role of helping others and experiencing some form of theosis through unity with one-ness.

This question was also designed to expose theological diversity. While it indeed exposed a variety of beliefs about life after death, it also exposed unanimity in terms of universalism, which might be better described as theological liberalism rather than diversity. This question also exposed strong conviction among the majority of interviewees that answering this question was

the purview of God, not of humankind. Willingness to not know answers because they are matters for God seems to indicate tolerance for theological ambiguity, which again appears to be correlated with welcoming of theological diversity.

Who was Jesus? Who is Jesus today? Can Jesus be someone different for different people?

Responses to this question ranged from the classic Christian doctrinal positions of son of God and second person of the Trinity, to a human being who demonstrated the greatest possible love and imitation of God, to simply “I don’t know.” One particularly intriguing was response was “Jesus was a gift,” and that accepting and acting on the gift does not requiring defining it or knowing from whence it came. Of interest is that most interviewees did not answer the third part of that question. If prompted, respondents answered by commenting “I haven’t thought about that” or “That’s an interesting question.”

This seemed to be the most challenging question for interviewees, likely related to the divinity of Jesus being fundamental Christian dogma. One respondent indicated an unwillingness to identify as Christian, feeling that doing so was somehow unethical or deceptive without a conviction that Jesus was God incarnate. Others clarified that they did not see a dichotomy in being a Christian and not understanding Jesus as God “because we are all divine.” Regardless, this question clearly evoked the most discomfort, with several interviewees investing significant time in describing their beliefs, or struggling to describe why their particular understanding of Jesus was not inconsistent with church teachings.

What is crucial for a person to be considered Christian? That is, who is a Christian?

Responses to this last question also varied considerably, ranging from a requirement to be born again, to the responses of seven interviewees who said anyone of any religion who follows the behavioral roadmap provided by Jesus’s teachings and demonstrations may a Christian. One

interviewee indicated that Christianity is a label applied by third parties, and another indicated that it is a self-applied label. Yet another pointed out that “Christ” is a label we impose on Jesus, and wondered about the possibility of anyone who believes that one specific person is “the Christ” could thus be considered Christian.

The responses clearly demonstrate theological diversity. Of interest is that individual responses appear to indicate that interviewees have quite rigid theological perspectives in some areas and quite liberal perspectives in others. There is clearly fluidity in identifying who is a Christian. There also appears to be desire to ensure that being a Christian is not an exclusivist situation but a state that is widely available to a diverse population.

The following quotes from interviewees demonstrate the theological diversity among members of St. Brendan’s, as well as the reasons why they value St. Brendan’s:

“St Brendan’s is where we let God be God and people be exactly who they are. No one tries to be God and tell me the answers.”

“God is manifest in many places other than the Christian church. Gods talks to all and through all. At St. Brendan’s this is a source of joy, a gift, not something to be feared.”

“Why am I doing this God stuff? Because I don’t understand life without it.”

“At St. Brendan’s, we take care of people. People matter.”

“There are no exceptions to God’s love.”

“God doesn’t force me into a small space. God enchants me with invitation to grow.”

“As a child, I was told ‘Keep your house clean, in case Christ shows up.’ But the Christ I know now doesn’t care about my house. He’s too busy throwing his arms open and loving me.”

“I feel strongly that we shouldn’t ‘interrupt’ people’s beliefs – they need those beliefs.”

“To be a Christian, you have to invite Jesus into your life and believe in Jesus as the son of God.”

“Being a Christian is about your values and behaviors, not about your beliefs.”

“St. Brendan’s doesn’t push me, it comforts me.”

“I don’t know what my beliefs are, but I know how good I feel when I am connected to other people. Is that God?”

“I don’t know who Jesus was, but I do know him.”

“Heaven is not a place you go when you die. It’s being at peace with what’s in your heart right now.”

“Heaven and hell are the places God sends you when you die.”

“Hell is being isolated from God.”

“I don’t believe God created anyone not to be included in a plan of salvation.”

“I don’t know what heaven and hell are. Is that OK?”

“Jesus was son of God.”

“Jesus is no more or no less God than you or I.”

“I don’t know if Jesus was a real person. And I don’t know that it matters if he was or not.”

“The only thing I’m pretty sure about regarding Jesus is that he wasn’t Caucasian.”

“The many mansions in heaven are not necessarily reserved for Christians. It’s a place for all God’s people, regardless of religion.”

“St. Brendan’s is the ‘large enough tent’ to shelter all of us on our journeys – all of us.”

Findings Summary

This case study project was designed to identify characteristics of a congregation that is specifically Christian but welcomes and celebrates theological diversity, based on the growing number of spiritual-but-not-religious and other seekers for whom traditional structures and strict adherence to dogma no longer have meaning or are simply unwelcoming. Identification of these characteristics could serve both seekers and the church, reducing spiritual isolation for the former and addressing membership declines for the latter. Moreover – and more important – developing

vibrant, meaningful church communities translates into a stronger vehicle for God's work in the world and expanded opportunities to serve each other as Christ served humankind.

Using St. Brendan's as a case study, with interviews of members as the study instrument, the following characteristics emerge as those most valued and most supportive of spiritual growth in an environment of theological diversity:

1. Emphasis on human relationships and community
2. Meaningful ministries that involve members in providing service to others
3. Understanding of community as an extension of worship
4. Clergy who support theological diversity and welcome differences
5. Comfort with theological ambiguity as evidenced by willingness to be the "large enough tent" described in interviews

Unexpected Outcomes

This project resulted in a number of unexpected outcomes. The primary one was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the closing of the churches in Alaska to physical gatherings. The closure significantly impeded ability to recruit interviewees, as well as to have robust conversations during the interview processes. My original strategy was to talk to church members at coffee hour and, if they were interested, schedule in-person interviews in the church's social hall. However, the closure required that I reach out to potential interviewees by email or telephone, and that actual interviews take place primarily virtually.

I had originally expected to interview 20 to 25 members, based on the enthusiasm received when I first discussed my project, when the church was still open for gatherings. At that time, I asked several members if they would participate, and I found my question met with concern from the individuals that they wouldn't understand questions about theology or that they

didn't fit with the study, or even that they simply weren't good enough candidates. A few moments of discussion to clarify that there were no right or wrong interview responses and that there was no such thing as someone being good enough or not good enough quickly resolved concerns. Attempting to have those conversations in email, however, was much more difficult. I wanted to be sensitive to not pushing someone who really was uncomfortable, and trying to identify if that was the situation was particularly challenging via email. As a result, my final sample size was only half of what I originally anticipated, even though it was still a significant portion of the small St. Brendan's congregation.

Four other unexpected outcomes were less about the project structure and more about revealing additional opportunities for the church to meet the changing member needs. Those outcomes were 1) the prevalence and impact of mystical experience among the interviewees, 2) the hunger to discuss difficult theological questions, and especially what one interviewee characterized as "spiritual fears," 3) the impact of painful life experiences on spirituality and the emotion that still arose from that pain, and 4) the desire of others outside of the St. Brendan's community to participate in the project.

Specific to mystical experiences, eight interviewees described mystical experiences that profoundly impacted their faith. Although none of the interview questions solicited information about such experiences, interviewees were eager to describe their experiences, with two indicating that they do not often have the opportunity to discuss such experiences and would like to discuss them with others who have also had mystical encounters and to share the transformational outcomes of the experiences. The experiences ranged from childhood visions of and conversations with deceased family members, to becoming one with nature by entering into the embodiment of God in nature by temporarily becoming a beautiful tree or something else in

nature, to conversations with Jesus or being physically with Jesus in Biblical settings. Some interviewees described a single experience and others described a variety of experiences over their lives. One interviewee described small transformational moments in prayer when God was suddenly overwhelmingly and beautifully present, and the world briefly receded in the presence of its creator. In all cases, the experiences were unexpected and utterly transformational, and never frightening or unwanted.

The second unexpected outcome was the appetite to discuss spiritual doubts and fears. While some interviewees were very confident in their theological stances, others were not, and the majority indicated many questions and areas they would like to explore. Examples were the divinity of Jesus, the physical resurrection, and the possible degrees of historicity versus metaphoricity of the Bible and of the creeds. Several mentioned the adult education program at St. Brendan's, and desire for more discussion of theological questions. Several interviewees also discussed having accumulated their own theological libraries in exploring such questions.

The third unexpected outcome was the freshness of the hurt individuals communicated related to painful life events such as the loss of a loved one. Four interviewees described events from the distant past that continue to inform their understanding of God. Individuals described growing spirituality or gaining wisdom as a result of the painful experience, but they nevertheless became emotional in describing their experiences. It was clear that although the events were in the past and they had been accepted as mysteries of life, the feelings persisted into the present.

The last unexpected outcome did not arise from the interviews but from general discussion of my project with professional colleagues, friends who are members of other churches, and others. Individuals uniformly indicated a desire to discuss their spiritual needs and

theological questions in a non-threatening environment. This desire appeared among church-goers and non-church-goers. Several people commented that religion was the last taboo subject in modern culture, and they regretted that was the situation and felt there was a fairly universal desire (at least in American culture) to be able to unpack spiritual issues without judgment or proselytizing.

I also noted unexpected outcomes in myself as the researcher. Clearly in this case where the research subjects were members of a community in which I share, I was not an unbiased investigator. Moreover, I was aware that I therefore filtered all of the information interviewees shared through the lens of my own experience of St. Brendan's and the people there, and through my own prejudices and expectations. Interviewees were individuals I thought highly of and enjoyed interacting with, and I looked forward to their insights. I did not, however, expect to be so moved by their candor and willingness to be vulnerable in their sharing. I twice found myself in tears as I listened to their stories, and I believe my relationship with each individual is much deeper and firmer as a result of the interactions, even in those cases where I hold very different beliefs. Moreover, my relationship with and understanding of God is expanded by this experience.

Chapter Six: Project Implications and Next Steps

Implications of Findings

Although the sample in this case study was small, the interviewees and their responses to interview questions were quite diverse. The characteristics exposed as supportive of theological diversity (emphasis on human relationships and community, meaningful ministries that involve members in providing service to others, understanding of community as an extension of worship, clergy who support theological diversity and welcome differences, and comfort with theological ambiguity) are ones that may be expanded at St. Brendan's or adopted/expanded at other congregations that wish to serve contemporary communities of seekers, spiritual-but-not-religious individuals, those who have left the church, and others who are religiously isolated.

The findings are consistent with other studies that find religion and the church in America to be undergoing a fundamental change, and to be increasingly less likely to meet Americans' spiritual needs.¹¹⁰ The findings are also consistent with the growing impact of larger cultural diversity in the United States, with less and less tolerance for superficial or incredible answers to life's big questions.¹¹¹ Last, the findings are consistent with research that demonstrates the growing mainline Protestant churches are those that "rework denominational tradition in light of local experience to create a web of practices that transmit identity, nurture community, cultivate mature spirituality, and advance mission."¹¹² This is precisely what interviewees at St. Brendan's describe when discussing coffee hour as an extension of worship, and the Galley as a source of Christian identity and community.

¹¹⁰ Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 29-31.

¹¹¹ Felton and Procter Murphy, *Living the Questions*, 15.

¹¹² Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church*, (Durham, NC: Alban Institute, 2004), 14.

Noteworthy is that some of these characteristics, such as meaningful ministries that involve the members in actual service delivery, are very concrete actions yet they support tolerance for very abstract concepts and the intangible ideas of theological diversity. The implications are thus that there are fairly immediate, concrete changes congregations can make to begin the work of meeting the needs of the larger community.

Potential Uses/Application of Findings

Potential application of the findings runs along a continuum. Churches may use the findings as a jumping off point for a complete overhaul of programs and ministries, or they may use them to spur ideas for incremental changes that may attract new members while maintaining continuity of mission and evangelism. The important thing, to paraphrase Diana Butler Bass, is to imagine the mainline Protestant church not as vapid and in decline but as vibrant and growing. What might it look like? And what are the first steps on the journey to creating that new church?¹¹³ The findings here provide some examples, some beginning points.

A more specific potential application of findings might be in exploring how spiritual direction or spiritual companioning might have a role in supporting tolerance for theological diversity, comfort with ambiguity, and general spiritual maturity. The appetite to discuss spiritual needs, fears, and goals seems to indicate a need for something more than traditional adult education programs.

Suggestions for Future Research

The findings from this project identify several areas for future research. As noted above, they are consistent with other research that has documented the characteristics of mainline Protestant churches that are theologically diverse. A related area for future practical research is

¹¹³ Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, 102.

identifying best practices for achieving the welcoming of theological diversity that appeals to contemporary populations who are otherwise disillusioned with the church. What would a roadmap look like? How long would it take to implement? And how long, once change is implemented, before it is culturally inculcated, and before it makes a measureable difference? Last on this topic, what are the metrics that apply to assessing this kind of change?

Other areas for research exposed through the interviews in this project are the prevalence and impact of mystical experience on personal spirituality and on congregations where mystical experience is openly discussed and celebrated. Programs such as the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola and the Cursillo movement are enjoying new interest, no longer limited to the Catholic Church, and may have a role to play – or already be playing a role – in meeting needs for a more embodied spirituality in mainline Protestant praxis.

There is also potential for this project to inform, albeit superficially, the development of new research into pastoral care for individuals who have experienced traumatic loss and associated pain. How does such pain impact spirituality and tolerance for theological diversity over time? And how can pastors best support survivors of such pain over the long term, and in such ways that the pain informs key facets of spirituality such as worship practice or tolerance for diversity?

Last, but completely out of scope of this exploratory project, I found myself wondering what these ideas might look like in a non-Christian context. As mainline Protestant churches work to meet the evolving spiritual needs of contemporary culture, how can that work enhance interreligious dialog and even shared faith practices across religious boundaries?

Conclusion

Paul Jones describes contemporary spiritual seekers as unsatisfied by post-modern utilitarianism and individualism which leaves them lonely and longing, the dystopian version of spiritual-but-not-religious. He describes religion in these situations as a language, providing a framework within which individuals can talk about and interpret their experiences, and thus find community and meaning in life.¹¹⁴ Jones further discusses an individual and cultural existential crisis, where seekers know what they need spiritually but no longer find in the institutional church:

...there is increasing evidence that life is proving to be less than they had hoped. This is especially true for those who reach a threshold in age or career where it is irrefutable that one only goes around once. In the time left, there is a growing desire to make a contribution, or to become different, or to belong where one can be accepted, down deep, for who one is....Although what is needed is becoming increasingly clear, the conservative single option is too contracted for the majority of searchers.¹¹⁵

Characteristics such as those emerging from the exploratory case study at St. Brendan's provide an opportunity to create and nurture the ethos Jones describes, providing for the Holy Spirit to continue her work through the institution of the church by the church meeting her people where they are, without imposition of expectations about where people "should" be, theologically speaking. Moreover, such a church environment creates community not through rigid adherence to doctrine and shared belief, but by imitating Christ's behavior through ministries that matter and imbue life experience with meaning.

Diana Butler Bass describes a conservative pastor's argument that the church is about the Kingdom of God, and that spiritual seeking is antithetical to preparing for that reign on Earth.

¹¹⁴ Jones, *Worlds Within a Congregation*, 82.

¹¹⁵ Jones, *Worlds Within a Congregation*, 31.

She points out, however, that this is a false dichotomy, noting that “practices done in imitation of Jesus naturally extend to the kingdom that Jesus preached.”¹¹⁶ Felton and Procter Murphy take the question even further, asserting that “limiting the Divine to one place or one time or one culture-bound expression creates barriers to deeper understandings of the mystery of life.”¹¹⁷

In other words, the church becomes a barrier to the Kingdom – and to those who seek communion with the Spirit – when it fails to recognize diversity as an asset. Felton and Procter Murphy stress this point in discussion of taking the church out into the world, as distinct from the much older – and no longer viable – model of expecting the world to first approach and then conform to the church:

Despite the tirades of legalistic preachers, the Christian life is not about believing the right stuff or even about being ‘good.’ It’s about a relationship with the Divine and with one another. It’s a relationship that does not leave us unchanged, but transforms us into more and more compassionate beings.... It’s not about having all the answers, but about wrestling with and living the great questions of life.¹¹⁸

As an exploratory project, the scope of this research was narrow and the findings non-scientific. However, that does not lessen their power. To paraphrase the member of St. Brendan’s who described Jesus as a gift, providing a church home where seekers and those wrestling with the mysteries of life can receive that gift is surely the evangelism to which the contemporary church is called.

¹¹⁶ Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 157.

¹¹⁷ Felton and Procter Murphy, *Living the Questions*, 185.

¹¹⁸ Felton and Procter Murphy, *Living the Questions*, 68.

Appendix 1: Survey Instrument

Introduction: **Theological Diversity Interview**

Updated April 29, 2020

Introduction:

- Thank participants for contributing
- Explain project and what I plan to do with information
- Explain that there are 10 questions, with no right or wrong answers
- Invite participants to ask questions at any time

Define theology for interviewees:

- Discourse about God (doesn't have to be Christian)
- "Faith seeking understanding"

Questions:

Questions about St. Brendan's:

1. How does St. Brendan's feed your spirit?
2. What role, if any, has St. Brendan's had in mediating or influencing your relationship with God?
3. What made you choose St. Brendan's, and what makes you stay at St. Brendan's?
4. How does St. Brendan's bring together people who experience Christian spirituality in different ways?

Questions about spirituality:

5. Are you spiritual or religious or both? Why do you say that?
6. How does your life experience impact your understanding of God?

Questions about theology:

7. What are some examples of theological questions you grapple with (if any)?
8. Who goes to heaven? Who goes to hell?
9. Who was Jesus? Who is Jesus today? Can Jesus be someone different for different people?
10. What is crucial for a person to be considered Christian?

Conclusion:

11. Is there anything else you would like me to know or consider?
12. Do you have any questions for me?

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